The Arab Spring: A Reason to Reject Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations

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In the post-9/11 world, Samuel Huntington's book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* attained an almost iconoclastic status and was presented almost as a prophetic text that described the nature of world politics. Huntington proposed that the globe was split into civilizational "zones" that demarked cultural identity, political ideology, and social understanding. In a modern world where these civilizations struggle for power, an inevitable "clash" would occur, mostly between the most powerful civilization's national moniker and the challenging civilization's counterpart. After 9/11, a new clash of civilization manifested, replacing the residual Cold War with a civilizational conflict between the Islamic world and the West – most specifically with the US, "Some argue that Islamist attacks represent a [new] transnational terrorism that differs in its timing, methods, lethality and underlying social origins from earlier Cold War-era leftist terrorism. Spurred by the Iranian revolution and post-Cold War international system in which the superpower rivalry was replaced by a new set of civilizational rivalries (Crenshaw & Robison)."

Huntington's work seemed to anticipate this apparent clash and described the Islamic world as one that harbored resentment and an anti-democratic ethos. This mythology was long circulated as unquestionable truth, an accurate portrayal of the Middle East, the Arab world, and Islam. These assertions have come under a lot of scrutiny, but even more recently criticisms against Huntington's depiction of Islamic civilization have gained significant credence. With the Arab Spring, the world saw a grassroots, democratic wave catch fire in the Islamic world ignoring geopolitical boundaries and showing signs of a consortium of healthy, active civil societies.

In this essay, I will critically evaluate Samuel Huntington's assertions about Islamic civilization. Further, I will explain how the Arab Spring is articulated evidence of democracy's compatibility with Muslims. First, I will briefly outline Huntington's general outlook of global politics. In response to these assumptions, I will provide the analysis of other constructivist authors. Though there is an occasional overlapping consensus, these authors view the recent social, political, and economic trends differently in relation to America's role in the world. Most specifically, the distinctions in their perceptions regarding Islam require significant amounts of attention and analysis. Additionally, I will portray the perspectives regarding the Islamic civilization. To further my objective, I will refute Huntington's argument that that the Muslim world fosters an inherently violent culture. Providing a framework that rejects Huntington's Orientalist worldview will help provide a foundation to explain the Arab Spring, its impact, and how Islamic political and civil society coincides with democratic values.

Huntington states that after the fall of the Soviet Union, "the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural." Establishing the identity of a people or a nation emerges through civilization-based grouping, the broadest means of identification, discerned by common cultural factors including "language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people." Ultimately, Huntington argues that these differences in civilizations will determine where conflicts arise. These major civilizations are Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Western, Latin American, and African. Moreover, the world is entering an era where worldwide politics is both multipolar and multicivilizational and that modernization will not morph states to utilize a Western paradigm. Westerners dangerously believe in the universality of their culture. Also, Huntington's fundamental argument is concerned with the role of the Western world, most specifically the United States, where he believes the civilization is in relative decline. In order to keep

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the US from falling from its position of relevancy, he argues that there needs to be an emphasis in embracing the West's uniqueness and to protect it from external threats.

Fareed Zakaria, on the other hand, strongly rejects that there is a decline of the West and that the seeming attenuation is an unfair comparison to its success in the past. "We are now living through the...great power shift of the modern era. It could be called the 'rise of the rest,'" says Zakaria. Markets of other nations are booming and the great status symbols of wealth are no longer solely in the US. He argues that China and India are becoming new world powers and that the US must accept and adapt to the new actors' positions internationally in order maintain its prominence. While the US is superior in terms of military strength, "every other dimension – industrial, financial, educational, social, cultural – the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance," he explains. This rise of the West is particularly significant in understanding how these waves of democracy operate. In the Middle East, the universality of human rights and democracy captured the ethos of people across geopolitical borders ushering in a new globalized era in international relations.

In regards to the Muslim world, Huntington argues that the most direct clash of civilizations pits the West against Islam. He cites a number of reasons as to why this conflict occurs, notably that the increased population bulge of Muslim youth is disproportionate to the amount of opportunity available. This imbalance has proved advantageous to terrorist organizations seeking to recruit new members from the pool of disaffected youngsters. Also, the revitalized values of Muslim society have created a post-colonial sentiment that has rejected the Western framework, regarding it as neo-imperial. Additionally, Huntington states that "the increasing contact between...Muslims and Westerns stimulate in each a new sense of their own identity and how it differs from that of the other," bifurcating the civilizations and augmenting already existing conflicts.

The most important and most controversial contention that Huntington makes is that he regards Islam as inherently violent and antithetical to peace. He argues that this is true for a number of reasons. First, Islam puts heavy emphasis on violence and their religious text lacks serious and substantial condemnation of bloodshed. Second, Muslims have established a legacy of expansion that still carries on; third, there are features of Islam that prevent assimilation and harmony with other civilizations. Fourth, there is a jockeying for power between Islamic nations seeking to emerge as the core state; a power vacuum that furthers instability. Finally, he illustrates the problem of the lopsided demographic of youth in the Muslim world inciting more volatility.

These observations of Islam deserve special attention and understanding. These are the most damning arguments Huntington makes to explain the indigestibility of Muslims in democracies and democracy's incompatibility with Political Islam. It is crucial to understand that Huntington's worldview of Islam is grossly mischaracterized and conflates Islamic fundamentalism with the interpretations most Muslims employ ideologically.

In terms of the comparison of violence present in Western religions and Islam, one can make a convincingly sound argument that Islam is less textually violent that Christianity. As religious scholar Karen Anderson points out, "There is far more violence in the Bible than in the Qur'an; the idea that Islam imposed itself by the sword is a Western fiction, fabricated during the time of the Crusades when, in fact, it was Western Christians who were fighting brutal holy wars against Islam." With thorough examination it is easy to spot the prevalence of holy decrees of violence and bloodshed in the Bible, "The Bible contains far more verses praising or urging bloodshed than does the Koran, and biblical violence is often far more extreme, and marked by more indiscriminate savagery (Jenkins)." In the Old Testament, the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews has been a story that often displays the violent nature

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of the origins of Judeo-Christian undertakings. Even Joshua had "conquered the land" and left nothing behind as a sort of ethnic cleansing. In terms of evaluating religious texts, Judaism and Christianity have far more encouragement of violence and as Jenkins describes, "deserve the utmost condemnation as religions of savagery (Jenkins)."

While it is true that are a compendium of verses in the Quran that cite violence, there is a clear just war theory that Muhammad illustrates in the Islamic conception of jihad. These rules of war, as theologian Seyyed Nasr maintains, are used to limit the brutality rather than to augment it, "Although defense of oneself, one's homeland, and one's religion and overcoming of oppression remain religious duties, the regulations of warfare, especially the protection of the innocent...and dealing with the enemy in justice, also remain part and parcel of the religion."

Islam as a religion is very much based in the recitations of God through Muhammad as a proxy. It was his obligation to promulgate the word of God throughout the region, specifically Mecca. The purpose of fleeing to Medina and arriving back to Mecca with the capabilities of forcibly quashing hostile forces is straightforwardly explained. It was simply a means to an end; burdened with the responsibility to spread the messages of the Divine, it was only sensible for Muhammad to preserve his own life and find a way to reclaim Mecca as the holy center of Islam.

Moreover, it is important to add context to the cultural setting of Arabia in the 8th century. Military conflict was not unusual; the Arab region was strife with tribal quarrels and warring that established a norm of political conduct. Muhammad was purely a man of his time, "The raiding party was a characteristic feature of life in Arabia in Muḥammad's time, so that his attempt to stop the Meccan caravan that resulted in the battle of Badr was accepted by all as customary and within his rights...and the majority of the

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other expeditions he led did not make contact with any enemy tribe but were largely demonstrations to the neighboring Bedouin tribes of his growing power (Welch, etc)." This seems to edify the actions of Muhammad as being justified to bring about his duty to God, as working within the open context of his cultural setting, and also as being limited in his use of force.

Furthermore, the reality of the discourses currently in Islam contrasts staggeringly to that of Huntington's perspective. Making a seemingly audacious claim, Zakaria argues that the threat of Islamic extremism is highly inflated. Though the catastrophes of September 11, 2001 and other ensuing terror attacks in Europe and Southeast Asia are nothing short of appalling, the casualties have been relatively limited. More importantly, the effectiveness of the War on Terror has frozen terrorist networks' financial mobility, crippling their capacities to instigate more attacks. The military operations against such organizations have also reduced terrorism in the Middle East to nothing more than rhetorically violent communications campaign.

In addition, the support for terror organizations is tremendously low and unpopular, Zakaria explains that "no society looks with admiration and envy on the fundamentalist Islamic model…it presents no competition to the Western-originated model of modernity that countries across the world are embracing." Most importantly, rouge terror-sponsoring nations simply do not possess the economic capabilities to supply severely damaging acts to the West.

Though both are compelling authors and constructivists, Zakaria does a much better job accurately analyzing the Muslim world. Huntington seems to believe that extremism is a condition of the inherently violent nature of Islam and that conflict between Muslims and the West is inevitable. It can be extrapolated from Zakaria's work that he does not believe that there is an intrinsic antagonistic factor to Islam. Rather, he states that terrorism is an extreme fringe of the civilization that is ineffective and rejected in its

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indigenous setting. Zakaria is correct in his observations that there is a push to modernize the Muslim world and that it will increase the compatibility of the civilization with the West.

Huntington goes through a painstaking assessment to arrive at the conclusion that Islam is an inherently violent and disruptive civilization. He states that during a period of the 1990s, fifteen of twenty intercivilization wars took place between the Islamic civilization and another culture. He also cites where, "nine of twelve intercivilizational conflicts were between Muslims and non-Muslims, and Muslims were once again fighting more wars than people from any other civilization." He even indicates that there are intracivilizational conflicts occurring between Muslims, further validating his claim of Islam's innate aggression. However, many of the observations Huntington mentions cannot be justifiably used to prove Muslim violence. In the example of Kosovo and the Xinjiang providence in China, Huntington is quick to note the conflict occurring, but not its origins. These were acts of genocide against Muslims that created a reactive wave of violence against their oppressors. These observations make it very difficult to identify the Muslims as the aggressors. The same case can be argued on behalf of Palestine and Chechnya; repression of the Islamic people has aroused violent conflict but there is nothing to indicate hostility as part of the nature of the civilization itself.

Another argument Huntington asserts is that there is a noticeable lack of Islamic scripture that promotes peace and deprecates violence. This is utterly untrue; the Qur'an makes great strides to advance the Muslim aspiration of peace and harmony to followers of other religions. It is also imperative to note the current phenomena of the Islamic Reformation, a phraseology given by Islamic intellectual Reza Aslan to explain the current juxtaposition Islam is faced with. Drawing from many parallels to the Christian Reformation, Aslan describes this reformation as inciting terrifying instability that has resulted from internal ideological discourse over the true

interpretations of Islam. Violence may erupt, but the horrifying precedent of the Christian Reformation anticipates these conflicts.

Also, there is also no core school of Islamic interpretation that dominates Muslim thought space. This is an issue that incites equally as much divergence as the argument that violence is brought by Islam lacking a stabilizing core state; Wahbbism and its followers have already brought about bloody conflicts with more moderate understandings of Islam. Internal and external conflict arises from these competing religious interpretations vying for control. Empirically, this violence is not a unique characteristic of Islam, but is a quality of faith-based collective identities in general.

Huntington relies on rhetoric from Islamic extremists such as Osama bin Laden who not only had limited appeal to Muslims but also lacked clerical authority and rejected the traditional theological order of Muslim schools. A rogue self-proclaimed Muslim symbol posing as a cleric issuing fatwas without the necessary credentials is not the proper representation of the Islamic civilization. Rather, al-Qaeda and the like speak in dualistic orotundity for political motives. Michael Dunn explained that this concept of a cosmic war is the prevailing ideology of conservatives for both civilizations, Islamic fundamentalist and neo-conservatives in the West alike, "Clearly, the creation of a discourse that portrays 'Islam' on the one hand and 'the West' on the other is… beneficial to the leaders of Islamic militant groups." Thus, continuing this faulty rhetoric further augments this divide threatening to bring mass-levels violence with it.

The Arab Spring's origins in late 2010 seem to confirm Zakaria's assertions that there is a "rise of the rest" and deny Huntington's reliance on cultural relativism. American hegemony has faded marginally and has ended the monopoly on democratic reform. Ben Ali's fall in Tunisia manifested the Arab civil spirit that human rights and democracy are not Western values but

rather, universal ones that bring freedom, liberty, and opportunity for human development. Protesters at Tahrir Square were not advancing a Western agenda, rather they were calling for their agency within their respective Arab identity, "Those fighting for democracy do not feel they are adopting Western values but rather that they are calling for the application of universally shared values that are compatible with their cultural and religious traditions. Arab democratic revolutionaries say they will resist the imposition of any cultural or political agenda by the West in the name of justice and dignity. This is one of the many signs that we are entering a post-Western era (de Vasconcelos)."

Theorist Edward Said's works offered the most credible critiques to authors like Bernard Lewis and Huntington. His central thesis of Orientalism extended to the concept of a cosmic battle between religion and cultural identity, mostly by exposing that these worldviews ignore the complexity of political scenes. The Middle East has been and will more than likely continue to be rife with multiple political entities jockeying for power that represent an even larger array of peoples with a multitude of sub-cultures and identities.

Said states that Huntington did not have "much time to spare for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization or for the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture, or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagogy and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization. No, the West is the West, and Islam, Islam." In a perfectly parsimonious scathing of Huntington, Said reveals the shortcomings of a clash of civilizations paradigm: it ignores the tremendously unusual history and formation of Middle Eastern states.

Political Islam is often blamed for the lack of democratic initiative in Muslim countries. Islamic values incorporated into the political sphere has drawn criticism as being the antipode to democracy, "There has been the

tendency in the West to presume that Islam is antithetical to the process of modernization…has often led to the automatic assumption that Islam and democracy…are incompatible (Abootalebi, 67)."

These denigrations are empirically misleading. Muslim nations such as Turkey and Indonesia have overwhelming predominately Islamic majorities and yet are still able to function as a fairly liberal democracy. The common myth that Islam hinders democratic change has no warrant yet is often considered as a truism in many political discourses. The problems of instituting a democracy in a Muslim nation seem to be a specific problem plaguing the Middle East.

The political jockeying for power in the established states in the Middle East has several problems that have made democracy building a very difficult task. Most importantly, the economic stagnation, and often redistribution of land, eroded the wealthier and middle classes to unite regardless of sectarian divide and establish a vanguard elite to bring progression and liberalization to the region, "Imperial rule discouraged the emergence of an independent merchant bourgeoisie that might have united the cities to demand such representation. In obstructing the emergence of private property in land until the nineteenth century, the state discouraged the consolidation of a landed aristocracy, an advance beyond tribal fragmentation crucial to state-society linkage (Hinnebusch)." If a wealthy class were established, the financial accumulation would have translated to political leverage and greatly impact public policy. With the constant reallocation of property, this seemingly egalitarian move made public opinion ineffective in convincing politicians to cater to the masses.

Also, the diversity of ethnic, religious, and tribal groups within each state made their specific social practices the foremost concern in their paradigm of identity. The inability to integrate into a single, cohesive

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population left states weak and unable to function in a conventional Western-formatted state, "The existence of a civil society implies a shared sense of identity, by means of, at least, tacit agreement over the rough boundaries of the political unit. In a word, a sense of citizenship, with associated rights and responsibilities...the individual in civil society is granted rights by the state, but, in return, acquires duties to the state (Norton)." There was little success in convincing minority groups with had strong ties to their distinctive identity to fuse in a common citizenship with a nation that effectively required adhering to a new social institution's agenda.

States that were lucky enough to overcome some those obstacles still had a very fragile civil society in the 20th century due to the inability for differing political agendas and ideologies to be tolerated by opposition. The lack of respect was often a result of fear that an alternative group would be dictating the political climate permanently which resulted in a radically unstable state-established institution. Norton explains, "Civil society is more than an admixture of various forms of association, it also refers to a quality-civility-without which the milieu consists of feuding factions. Civility implies the willingness of individuals to accept disparate political views and social attitudes. Thus, a robust civil society is more than membership lists, public charters, and manifestoes, [it is] the underpinning of democracy (Norton)." The constant struggle to control the political arena rather than compromise and work with multiple entities created a dangerous precedent of attempting to take extra-judicial measures to secure political interests.

These political implications are exactly the peculiar complexities of the Arab region that have proven to be the true obstacles to democracy in parts of the Muslim world, not Islam. In many ways Political Islam harbors inherently democratic messages and quelled the problems of sub-state identities to foster a civil society of consensus building. The unique troubles of the Middle East have to deal, as aforementioned, with the repercussions of

colonialism, "But it was not until the 20th century when the advent of Western domination and colonialism forced religious authorities to seriously think about the implications for Muslims of the Western military, economic, technological, and maybe even ideological superiority (63)." The restructuring of Islamic rhetoric to enable political movements was a calculated response to the damage inflicted to the region and was utilized as a common language and a regional solution.

There is a plethora of evidence that many interpretations of Islam are not only harmonious with democracy, but rather call for a strict adherence to several democratic principles. In fact, the ability for imams and other religious figures to hold political offices require recognition of democratic values such as majority rule, "It has been argued that political leadership in Islam is intended by God to be based on popular sovereignty and no religious authority, including Prophet Mohammed, is exempt from popular will (66)." Moreover, it is important to note than often, Islam is used as a counter-ideology to the state if it happens to be secular. For example, Hinnebusch explains that the secular Ba'athist Party in Syria was opposed by most Islamic institutions in Damascus. Considering the party to be socialist, the imams emphasized the importance of free-market economics while creating a wider pluralist base and helped bring more democratic change to Syria. The same can be said for Iraq as well; considering it was a nation the United States considered be a direct threat to democracy in the region, the Ba'athist of Sadaam Hussein were undeniably secular.

To further the irony of the West, the foreign policy agenda toward the Middle East was rather counter-intuitive to the rhetoric that was espoused from American political mouthpieces. The justification for intervention in Iraq quickly shifted to democracy promotion as an effective tool in the War on Terror. After US forces uncovered that weapons of mass destruction were not present in Baghdad, Bush's neo-conservatives contended that liberal

democracy in Iraq would trigger a wave of democracy in the Middle East eliminating terror groups in the process. In practice however, the case for democratization as a pretext for war seemed contrary to American aid and support for regimes in the region that were despotic and totalitarian. This paradox strongly diluted the Western voices clamoring for democracy in the Middle East, "The social engineering of democratic processes was further aggravated by the pursuit of what were mutually exclusive goals: the intervention in Iraq was undertaken in the name of democracy and spreading democracy to the Arab world, but the fight against terrorism was undertaken in cooperation with authoritarian regimes and in connivance with their repressive anti- democratic methods (de Vasconcelos)."

The Arab Spring was the result of revolutionary fervor and a demand for improved living conditions both materialistically and in terms of liberty. It culminated from a grassroots level and not from engaging reforms encouraged from the West or from social pressures of the international community and it certainly did not come from American interests. Quite the opposite is true – Arab dictators clung to their power while continuing to receive support from the United States, a residual affect of the Bush-era strategy for eradicating terror.

Regardless, Islamic political groups were largely responsible for the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and currently Syria. They have surfaced as the only plausible alternative to the current regimes stems from their wide base, organization, and popular messages of overthrowing oppressive regimes. Logically it follows that they have enjoyed a good amount of electoral success and it is a safe assertion to believe this tendency will continue for some time. With the fostering of a unified civil society recognizing a single state identity, the challenges of the democratic political project are still bitterly present. Consensus building between political factions is as important as the implementation of a democratic constitution. With creating an environment

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that fosters political growth, all parties must respect the game that is democracy rather than abuse short-lived power to promote a particular agenda. The cooperation that's necessary for polar political parties is an essentially important factor for the health of emerging democracies, "The consensus between liberals and Islamists is essential for the success of the democratic transition and for drafting a democratic constitution, one that reflects the will of the whole 'people' and not just the views of a small majority. That is what other experiences of democratic transitions suggest (de Vasconcelos)." Moderation on public policy is typically the condition that best fosters social development and benefits the greatest range of people.

The real challenge that confronts the Middle East is the intermingling of political interests from a variety of angles and philosophies. With these internal issues about the authority of Islam, the collective feeling of despair brought on by colonialism has had the Muslim world struggling with the issues of modernity. In attempts to bring Pan-Islamic movements as the alternative to the Western concept of the state, many Western critics reduce Islam to an entity that is centered on politics and hegemony. These historic cultural fault lines have led to the perception of conflict with the West, resulted in even more misunderstanding of Islam. Rather, Islam is in an extraordinary and momentous period that will dictate its future as it grapples with the issues of modernity and temporal pluralism. The Arab Spring is the greatest articulated evidence that Islamic civilization is able to digest democracy despite its tumultuous and unusual history. Though the implications of how this will alter the Middle East's strategic equation are unclear, it can be deduced that democracy's message has championed itself as one that is universal and culturally compatible. The Arab Spring also confirms what many have advanced for a decade: we are living in a post-Western world where

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